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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 000071

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DEPT FOR AF/C

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/20/2019

TAGS: CM ECON KCOR PGOV PHUM PREL

SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S SECRETARY GENERAL AT PRESIDENCY ON ELECAM, SECURITY, ECONOMY

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a January 16 meeting with Ambassador, Secretary General of the Presidency and Minister of State Laurent Esso defended President Biya's decisions in naming the Electoral Commission (ELECAM). He forcefully criticized the political opposition and elements of the international community, arguing that the world should stop criticizing Cameroon and recognize its accomplishments. He praised U.S.-Cameroon relations and hoped for closer security assistance. He also argued for a strong state role in the economy, questioning whether the private sector had done much to create new jobs. One of Biya's top aides, Esso revealed a dangerous disdain for democratic opposition, the private sector, and the international community, and left us even more skeptical about ELECAM. End summary.

ELECAM

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¶2. (C) The Ambassador told Esso that we had lost some confidence in democracy in Cameroon because of President Biya's recent decision to name members for the new Electoral Commission ELECAM who came mainly from the ruling CPDM party. Esso responded forcefully that critics shouldn't assume that ELECAM members are incompetent because they come from the CPDM. "What has civil society done for the country? Nothing," he bellowed, arguing that the media only lobbs insults at the government and that leading opposition figures like Social Democratic Front President John Fru Ndi and Cardinal Christian Tumi are not more honest or capable than the new ELECAM members. He questioned what Fru Ndi, Tumi, and other prominent opposition figures had done with their lives, calling most of them "failures" and noting that he had achieved more than any of them. "The opposition doesn't mean anything in Cameroon," he concluded, cautioning against assumptions that the state or CPDM can't be honest, competent or good.

Don't Lecture Us

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¶3. (SBU) Still on the defensive, Esso argued that the government's corruption-related arrests under "Operation Eparvier" demonstrated its will to combat corruption, although this effort takes time and the government can't tackle everything at once. He highlighted Cameroon's stability and social harmony, saying there was too much criticism and not enough praise for what has been accomplished.

¶4. (C) Foreigners needed to have patience with governance and democracy in Africa, he said, arguing "give Africa the benefit of good will; don't lecture us." He blamed the colonial powers for not building a democratic culture and

questioned whether the World Bank or UK had done anything constructive for Cameroon. He saw Britain's election of Prime Minister Gordon Brown as undemocratic and the Commonwealth as not helping its members. The Ambassador assured him that we appreciated the government's positive efforts but were impatient for faster progress in fighting corruption and improving governance.

Relations with U.S./Security

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¶ 15. (C) Esso praised Cameroon's "excellent relations" with the United States, saying that he did not expect major changes with the Obama administration and thought the new president's focus would be more on global and U.S. economic issues than on relations with Africa. He appreciated the key role of U.S. support in getting Nigerian cooperation in the handover of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon in August 2008.

¶ 16. (C) Nigeria needed to pay more attention to security in the Gulf of Guinea, Esso said, blaming the current insecurity in Bakassi on Nigerian government neglect. He hoped that the U.S. could help pressure Nigeria on this issue. Pirates needed to feel they are being chased and are unsafe to operate, he added. He noted the importance of putting security assets in place, asserting that "it's not a matter of negotiating, it's a matter of assets," and hoping that the USG could contribute to this effort. The Ambassador explained the breadth of our bilateral mil-mil relations.

Economy

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¶ 17. (SBU) Esso saw the need for a better balance of public and private sector involvement in the economy, with greater regulation and more government support for banks. While small and medium enterprises should be key, he thought the private sector in Cameroon had done little to create employment, especially compared to the state. Ambassador mentioned the need to improve the business climate; he blamed the World Bank and the international community for imposing economic "experiments that don't work" and criticized foreign investors for "not knowing Cameroon". When asked about the long-stalled Investment Charter, Esso said he didn't know about it but pointed to the need for "practical solutions" rather than new theories and saw agriculture as the key to future economic stability.

Comment

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¶ 18. (C) This was one of the Ambassador's most disturbing meetings to date in Cameroon. Esso is one of the most powerful figures in the country - a former minister of external relations, defense, public health, and justice, with over ten years in the presidency. He is believed to be one of President Biya's most trusted advisors and a possible successor. This makes his views on the political opposition, the economy and the outside world all the more scary and leaves us even more skeptical about ELECAM. Courteous and low key during our economic and security discussion, Esso quickly became angry and arrogant when we broached ELECAM. We didn't pick up the kind of anti-Americanism we have seen from him in the past, but rather a defensiveness toward the outside world and an inwardness that make him and the Biya administration out of touch and difficult to influence. Ambassador later shared the Esso conversation with French Ambassador Georges Serre, who commented that Esso lashes out like this when he feels insecure.

GARVEY